



Fall of the Alamo—Death of Crockett, *circa 1837*

# The Death of David Crockett

*When the author wrote a modern epic poem  
about the Alamo, he stumbled into one of the bloodier  
skirmishes of the academic culture wars.*

*by Michael Lind*

**B**efore sunrise on March 6, 1836, the most famous siege in American history came to an end. More than a thousand troops under the command of General Antonio López de Santa Anna, the military dictator of Mexico, stormed the Alamo fortress in San Antonio, where Texan rebels against Mexican authority—Anglo-American settlers, Tejano natives, and soldiers of fortune from the United States and Europe—

had been waiting for reinforcements that never came. All of the defenders—roughly 180 or more—were killed in battle or executed soon afterward.

News of the fall of the Alamo sent shock waves far beyond war-torn Texas, where secessionists had just declared the independence of their republic. Among the fallen defenders were two celebrities from the United States. The knifefighter James Bowie was one. But his renown was over-

shadowed by that of David Crockett, the “congressman from the canebrake” of Tennessee who had replaced Daniel Boone as a symbol of the American frontiersman. After being defeated in a race for Congress, Crockett—whom the Whig party had once considered as a possible presidential candidate—had made his way to insurgent Texas to make a fresh start. A fellow graduate of Tennessee politics, Sam Houston, commander of the weak and disorganized Texan army, had assigned Crockett to the garrison at San Antonio. There, with Bowie and less known figures such as the garrison’s young commander, William Barret Travis, Crockett met his death.

In the legend that grew up around Crockett, he died fighting in the last-ditch defense of the Alamo. Recent scholarship, however, has suggested another possibility: that Crockett was executed by Santa Anna along with several others *after* the battle was over. I discovered just how controversial this question remains when I published *The Alamo*, a narrative poem about the Texas Revolution. In my first draft, I followed some recent historical accounts of the Texas Revolution that treat Crockett’s execution at the hands of Santa Anna as an established fact. As I researched the subject further, however, I concluded that the story of Crockett’s execution, like the equally well-known story of the line Travis drew in the dust at the Alamo, was folklore. In the final version of the poem, Travis does not draw that line, and Crockett, a minor character in the story I tell, falls in battle. In a vituperative attack on *The Alamo* in the *New York Times*, the journalist Garry Wills accused me (along with Wills’s *bête noire*, the late John Wayne, in his movie *The Alamo*) of purveying patriotic “hokum” to the American public by showing Crockett being killed in battle. The ensuing debate has involved several exchanges in print between Wills and my fellow Texan, CBS news anchor Dan Rather.

What this unexpected controversy revealed is that the death of Colonel David

Crockett—or “Davy Crockett,” as he became known in 19th-century almanacs and 20th-century pop culture—is a contested front in the late-20th-century American culture war. To understand why, we have to go back to the 1950s, when Walt Disney’s TV series starring Fess Parker elevated “Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier” into *the* American hero. Crockett’s mythic status was enhanced even further when John Wayne portrayed him in *The Alamo* (1960).

Generational politics explains the controversy surrounding a purported 1836 memoir by a Mexican officer present at the battle, José Enrique de la Peña. (Because the memoir incorporates material that de la Peña could only have acquired later, it must have been completed after 1836.) In 1955 a Mexican antiquarian and book-seller named Jesús Sánchez Garza published *La Rebelión de Texas* in Mexico City. The manuscript was acquired by a Texas philanthropist, John Peace, for his John Peace Memorial Library, at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In 1974, Peace gave his permission for Carmen Perry to undertake a translation, which was published in 1975 by Texas A&M Press as *With Santa Anna in Texas: A Personal Narrative of the Revolution*. Here is the memoir’s account of Crockett’s death:

Some seven men had survived the general carnage and, under the protection of General Castrillon, they were brought before Santa Anna. Among them was one of great stature, well proportioned, with regular features, in whose face there was the imprint of adversity, but in whom one also noticed a degree of resignation and nobility that did him honor. He was the naturalist David Crockett, well known in North America for his unusual adventures, who had undertaken to explore the country and who, finding himself in Bejar at the very moment of surprise, had taken refuge in the Alamo, fearing that his status as a foreigner might not be respected. Santa Anna answered Castrillon’s intervention in Crockett’s behalf with a gesture of indignation and, addressing himself to the sappers, the troops closest to him,

ordered his execution. The commanders and officers were outraged at this action and did not support the order, hoping that once the fury of the moment had blown over these men would be spared; but several officers who were around the president and who, perhaps, had not been present during the moment of danger, became noteworthy by an infamous deed, surpassing the soldiers in cruelty. They thrust themselves forward, in order to flatter their commander, and with swords in hand, fell upon these unfortunate, defenseless men just as a tiger leaps upon his prey. Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers. It was rumored that General Santa Anna was one of them; I will not bear witness to this, for, though present, I turned away horrified in order not to witness such a barbarous scene.

Appearing as it did immediately after the Vietnam War and Watergate, the translation of the de la Peña book was seized upon by certain scholars and some in the media who sought to prove that the childhood hero of coonskin cap-wearing baby boomers was a fraud. Others vilified anyone unpatriotic enough to question the traditional account of Crockett's heroic death. The emotions that the subject arouses clearly have had less to do with Crockett or the distant Texas Revolution than with attitudes toward American history, patriotism, and the military at the end of the 20th century.



The controversy over how David Crockett died raises a profound question: how can we be certain of anything in history? Where there is no corroborating physical evidence—as in the case of the suicide of Cleopatra—historians must rely on reports from the time. In two millennia, nobody has ever suggested that Cleopatra survived following her disastrous defeat at the Battle of Actium, or that anyone murdered her.

Similarly, no one disputes the fact that a handful of Texan prisoners were executed at Santa Anna's order after the fall of the Alamo. When it comes to the question of whether Crockett was one of them, however, there have always been conflicting accounts—something that is hardly surprising, in the case of a battle in a western frontier town in the early 19th century. The conflicting reports have been explained in two ways. The *corroboration theory* holds that all of the accounts of Crockett's execution reflect a real event; any differences among them can be attributed to confusion and the vagaries of memory. The fact that eyewitness accounts of a traffic accident differ in small details does not prove that the traffic accident never occurred. The *contamination theory* holds that the story of Crockett's execution was an erroneous rumor, which made its way into Texan and American newspapers and thence into memoirs written later by both North Americans and Mexicans. Like a modern computer virus, the apocryphal story of Crockett's execution infected an ever-growing number of documents over time.

Exhibit A for the corroboration theory, of course, is the de la Peña memoir. The matter is settled, once and for all, if the memoir is the work of de la Peña, *and* if de la Peña was telling the truth, *and* if he knew who David Crockett was. Skeptics have questioned all three of these assumptions. On the basis of internal inconsistencies and the lack of a chain of provenance, Bill Groneman, a lay historian and expert on the battle of the Alamo, has flatly claimed that the de la Peña memoir is a hoax. Such a claim is not as extreme as it may appear, given the number of forged documents from the Texas Revolution that have fetched high prices from Texas collectors (to say nothing of other celebrated forgeries, such as the Hitler diaries and the alleged Kennedy letters). But the case for the manuscript's authenticity arguably was strengthened by the 1994 discovery, by historian James E. Crisp of North Carolina

> MICHAEL LIND, a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine, is the author of *The Alamo: An Epic* (1997). Copyright © 1998 by Michael Lind.

State University, of a hitherto-unknown pamphlet by de la Peña, “A Victim of Despotism,” published in 1839, which mentions a “diary” on which he was working and contains language similar to the controversial memoir. The matter may not be settled until the Peace family, which still owns the memoir manuscript, permits scientific tests. (So far they have refused.)

Even if the de la Peña memoir manuscript is authentic, it does not follow that its account is entirely trustworthy. The manuscript is not simply a “diary,” but has been padded with material obtained after the war, including some items from English-language sources, such as Travis’s famous letter from the Alamo. De la Peña (who died in 1842) might have rewritten a diary or notes years after the events described. Lending credibility to this hypothesis is this reference to the execution in “A Victim of Despotism”:

If those in the cultured countries name us savages and assassins, none more than general [sic] Santa Anna has given an occasion to this. In the Alamo he ordered the murder of a few unfortunates who had survived the catastrophe, and whom general Castrillon presented imploring his mercy. Among those had been a man who pertained to the natural sciences, whose love of it had conducted him to Texas, and who locked himself up in the Alamo not believing it safe by his quality of foreigner, when general Santa Anna surprised Bejar.

If the “man who pertained to the natural sciences” was Crockett, then why didn’t de la Peña name him in this document, as he did in the memoir? Skeptics who agree that the longer manuscript is authentic have an explanation—the contamination thesis. De la Peña may have witnessed, or may have been told about, the executions after the battle, but neither he nor any of his comrades knew who the murdered prisoners were. When he sat down to write his memoir, however, de la Peña may have become aware of American newspaper accounts that Crockett had been among those executed.

Doubts about de la Peña’s ability to identify members of the Alamo garrison

can only be strengthened by examination of the rest of *With Santa Anna in Texas*. Consider de la Peña’s supposed eyewitness account of the death of Travis (a passage that debunkers hostile to military heroism never quote, for obvious reasons):

Travis was seen to hesitate, but not about the death that he would choose. He would take a few steps and stop, turning his proud face toward us to discharge his shots; he fought like a true soldier. Finally he died, but he died after having traded his life very dearly. None of his men died with greater heroism, and they all died. Travis behaved as a hero; one must do him justice, for with a handful of men without discipline, he resolved to face men used to war and much superior in numbers, without supplies, with scarce munitions, and against the will of his subordinates. He was a handsome blond, with a physique as robust as his spirit was strong.

According to the testimony of his slave Joe, who survived the battle, Travis was killed while defending the northern wall of the Alamo. If we are to believe the account in *With Santa Anna in Texas*, we must believe that either de la Peña himself, or an informant in the Mexican army, was able to distinguish Travis from the other Texans, while looking up from below the wall and being fired upon, in the darkness before daybreak. If de la Peña was the alleged eyewitness, then we must further believe that, after witnessing the death of Travis on the north wall, he providentially made his way to the other side of the fortress—just in time to see David Crockett executed by Santa Anna!

The credibility of de la Peña’s memoir, then, stands or falls on its descriptions of the deaths of both Crockett and Travis. Indeed, there is reason to be skeptical even about de la Peña’s 1839 account of the execution of the prisoners, in which he did not mention Crockett. Two years before de la Peña included that passage in “A Victim of Despotism,” another attack on the fallen dictator had been published in Mexico by Ramon Martinez Caro, who had been Santa Anna’s personal secretary during the war in Texas. According to Caro:

Among the 183 killed there were five who were discovered by General Castrillon hiding after the assault. He took them immediately to the presence of His Excellency who had come up by this time. When he presented the prisoners he was severely reprimanded for not having killed them on the spot, after which he turned his back upon Castrillon while the soldiers stepped out of their ranks and set upon the prisoners until they were all killed. . . . We all witnessed this outrage which humanity condemns but which was committed as described. This is a cruel truth, but I cannot omit it.

The 1837 Caro account is important for two reasons. First of all, it might have been a source for de la Peña's account in his 1839 pamphlet, as well as for the expanded version found in *With Santa Anna in Texas*. More important, Caro's eyewitness account, published only a year after the battle, does not identify any of the prisoners as Crockett. If Crockett had been one of the prisoners and his identity had been known to his Mexican captors, the fact should not have escaped the attention of Caro, who was standing at Santa Anna's side.

❧                      ❧                      ❧

**D**efenders of the theory that Crockett was among those executed argue that the existence of other accounts corroborates the claim. Are those stories corroborating evidence—or evidence of contamination by rumor?

In the weeks after the fall of the Alamo, conflicting and often imaginative accounts of Crockett's last moments filled letters and newspapers in Texas and the United States. Among the civilian survivors, Susannah Dickinson, the widow of one of the Alamo defenders, and Travis's slave Joe, both of whom were allowed to go to join Houston's rebel army, claim to have seen Crockett's body, presumably where he had fallen in combat. In the earliest letters mentioning the fall of the Alamo, written by Texans in March, two facts are repeated: first, that everyone, including Crockett, was killed in or after the battle; and second, that several of the defenders

(the number usually given is six or seven) surrendered and were executed after the battle at Santa Anna's order. None of the contemporaneous accounts identified Crockett as one of the executed prisoners. Indeed, the most common apocryphal stories among the Anglo-Americans had Travis, or Bowie, or both committing suicide once they saw the battle was lost.

As the weeks and months passed, however, the death of Crockett and the execution of the prisoners became conflated in newspaper stories and memoirs. One or more of the most famous members of the garrison—Crockett, Bowie, Travis, James Butler Bonham, or some combination—were now said to have been among the prisoners whom Santa Anna had executed. The earliest of these “celebrity prisoner” accounts is found in the *New Orleans True American* of March 29, 1836: “The Mexicans fought desperately until daylight, when seven only of the garrison were found alive. We regret to say that Col. David Crockett and his companion Mr. Benton, also the [sic] Col. Bonham of South Carolina, were of the number who cried for quarter but were told there was no mercy for them. They then continued fighting until the whole were butchered.” The newspaper, however, reprinted a letter of March 16 by Andrew Briscoe, a long-time Texas settler, who claimed, “Colonels James Bowie and Crockett were among the slain; the first was murdered in his bed in which he had been confined by sickness. The later [sic] fell fighting like a tiger.”

**T**he first American newspaper account identifying Crockett as one of the executed prisoners appeared in a letter of July 19, 1836, written by a Texas army officer, George M. Dolson. Dolson claimed to have served the previous day, July 18, as an interpreter between Colonel James Morgan and Santa Anna's aide, Colonel Juan Almonte, one of the Mexican officers whom Morgan held prisoner on Galveston Island after the Texans routed the Mexican army and captured Santa Anna at San Jacinto. According to Dolson, “Colonel Crockett was in the rear, had his arms folded, and appeared bold as the lion as he passed my informant

[Almonte]. Santa Anna's interpreter knew Colonel Crockett, and said to my informant, 'the one behind is the famous Crockett.' When brought to the presence of Santa Anna, Castrillon said to him, 'Santa Anna, the august, I deliver up to you six brave prisoners of war.' Santa Anna replied, 'Who has given you orders to take prisoners, I do not want to see those men living—shoot them.'" While this would appear to be strong corroboration, skeptics point out that Almonte's diary, found after the Battle of San Jacinto, does not mention the alleged incident in its description of the sack of the Alamo.

However one weighs it, the Dolson letter, after the de la Peña memoir, is the strongest potential corroborating evidence for the execution theory. Other alleged corroborative accounts are either American newspaper articles, which adherents of the "contamination" thesis can dismiss as mere echoes of already published rumors, or second- and third-hand accounts in interviews and memoirs long after the fact. For example, in 1904 a veteran of the Texan army, William P. Zuber, described the story of Crockett's execution, which he attributed, via a Texas raconteur, to Santa Anna's son-in-law General Martin Perfecto Cos, as an example "of the myths related of the fall of the Alamo." In the same letter, Zuber explained how Texans pressured Mexican prisoners into confirming rumors that had been circulating on the Texan side: "After the battle of San Jacinto, some of our men repeated [the rumors] interrogatively to prisoners, inquiring if they were true, and many of them, to seem intelligent, confirmed them, answering in effect, 'Yes, that is true. I saw it.' These yarns spread from mouth to ear, as facts, among the prisoners, and even some of the generals utilized them in modified form in [an] effort to prove themselves innocent of the outrages perpetrated by their countrymen."

A dynamic like the one Zuber describes seems to have been at work in the case of

Francisco Becerra, an alleged veteran of the battle on the Mexican side who was eager to please Anglo-American writers in later decades by supplying them with information about the fall of the Alamo. Becerra, interviewed 39 years after the battle, claimed that Santa Anna had executed Crockett—and Travis, too! Generations

later, Zuber, who had passed on one of the Crockett execution stories



*The execution version of Crockett's death circulated even during the 19th century. This woodcut appeared in an 1869 edition of Crockett's autobiography.*

(which even he admitted was a "myth"), related how James Bowie had also survived the battle and had been thrown alive onto the funeral pyre of the other Texans. (Zuber was also the source of the story of Travis's line in the dust, another Alamo fable.)

The evidence, then, presents difficulties for those who argue that Crockett surrendered, only to be executed. The most plausible near-contemporary Mexican accounts,

those written by Caro in 1837 and de la Peña in 1839, agree that there were executions, but do not identify Crockett as one of those executed, while the purported Mexican accounts that identify Crockett as a prisoner are either obviously false like Becerra's or are attributed to Mexican officers in captivity by Anglo-American intermediaries such as Dolson, sometimes long after the alleged event. Proponents of the execution theory must accept accounts of Crockett's execution, while dismissing equally plausible (or equally dubious) stories that other well-known Alamo defenders such as Travis, Bowie and Bonham also survived the battle.



A final set of witnesses remains to be presented. All are from the Mexican side, so they cannot be accused of seeking to glorify Crockett by lying about his death in combat.

After the battle, Santa Anna asked the alcalde, or mayor, of San Antonio, Francisco Ruiz, who knew the leaders of the garrison, to identify their bodies. According to Ruiz, "Toward the west in a small fort opposite the city, we found the body of colonel Crockett." (The "small fort" may have been the southeastern courtyard between the palisade and the familiar chapel front.)

Ruiz made his statement years after the events. What may be the definitive account of Crockett's death was written shortly after it occurred by his supposed executioner, Santa Anna, in his 8 A.M. dispatch to Mexico City: "The fortress at last fell into our power with its artillery, ammunition, etc., and buried among the ditches and trenches are more than 600 [probably fewer than 200] bodies, all of them foreigners. . . . Among the dead were the first and second in command of the enemy, the so-called colonels Bowie and Travis, Crockett of equal rank and all the other leaders and officers." If, only minutes before, the most famous among those whom Santa Anna in the same letter called "collaborators who have come from the United States of the North" had been presented to Santa Anna as a prisoner, it seems odd that the Mexican dictator did not mention this in

his boastful report. Nor would he have been ashamed of ordering Crockett's execution; two weeks later, Santa Anna ordered the cold-blooded killing of 400 unarmed Texan prisoners of war at Goliad. One could argue that, while Santa Anna did not know who Crockett was, one or more of his aides recognized the celebrated Tennessean—but this seems a bit far-fetched. Santa Anna's dictated after-action report implies that Crockett died like the other leaders whose corpses in "the ditches and trenches" were identified at the general's request by San Antonio's mayor.

In favor of the theory that Crockett died in combat, then, are the accounts of Santa Anna and Ruiz, which can be added to the written statements of Caro in 1837 and of de la Peña in 1839—neither of whom identified Crockett as one of the prisoners Santa Anna had executed. The most powerful evidence for the execution theory is de la Peña's memoir, *With Santa Anna in Texas* (which evidence now strongly suggests he completed *after* his 1839 pamphlet), and certain letters and accounts in the Texas and U.S. press, particularly the letter of James Dolson, that appear to corroborate it.

To believe the "corroboration" theory, one must believe that Santa Anna executed the famous David Crockett, but neglected to mention the fact in his after-action report an hour or so later; that his personal secretary, describing and denouncing the execution of Texan prisoners in 1837, also failed to mention that fact; and that Enrique de la Peña himself neglected to mention it, in his account of the executions written in 1839. One must also believe reports in letters and in the Texas and U.S. press that Crockett was executed, while dismissing more-or-less identical stories about Travis and Bowie. The contamination thesis presents the historian with far less to explain. Shortly after the battle ended, Santa Anna inspected the fallen Alamo, and was presented with a handful of prisoners of war by General Castrillon. Santa Anna ordered their summary execution, an act witnessed (and later deplored) by his secretary, Ramon Martinez Caro, and others, possibly including José Enrique

de la Peña. Afterward (or perhaps earlier), Santa Anna ordered the San Antonio mayor, Francisco Ruiz, perhaps with the aid of Travis's slave Joe, to identify the leaders of the Alamo garrison among the dead. Ruiz found Crockett's body where the Tennessean had fallen during the battle, possibly between the palisade and the chapel front (the "small fort"). It was here that Susannah Dickinson, being led from the chapel after the battle, may have seen Crockett's remains.

Soon rumors among the Texan rebels and in the United States were placing Crockett and other well-known defenders such as Travis, Bowie, and Bonham among the prisoners executed at Santa Anna's command. These apocryphal stories followed the rules of popular historical fiction, in which the famous persons of a given era or place have chance encounters with one another. It was not enough that Santa Anna executed a handful of unknown southern or midwestern farm boys or European soldiers of fortune; no, the evil tyrant had to order the killing of the most famous defender, David Crockett, in cold blood. Assuming that de la Peña's memoir is authentic, the author may have identified the elderly man named in his earlier 1839 account as Crockett, *after* reading accounts in the North American or Mexican press in which Crockett, previously unknown in

Mexico, was given a prominent place.

The margin of error in this matter is so great that reasonable people, including eminent historians such as James Crisp and Dan Kilgore, can conclude that Crockett was indeed executed. Given the limited and conflicting evidence, there can be little chance of a consensus about what happened in the smoking ruins of the Alamo early one morning 162 years ago. About two questions, however, there can be no debate. Colonel David Crockett, along with almost 200 Texan defenders and hundreds of Mexican soldiers, died a painful death that morning in 1836—and he died bravely. Those who have seized upon the stories of Crockett's surrender as proof that an American hero was actually a coward appear to be unaware of the laws of war in the 19th century, which prescribed acceptance of surrender (the Texans themselves had paroled the Mexican army from which they had captured the Alamo a few months earlier). And those who use accounts of his execution to denigrate Crockett appear not to have read the testimony of their own star witnesses—first and foremost, José Enrique de la Peña in *With Santa Anna in Texas*: "Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers."

### *Further Reading*

Carmen Perry's translation of José Enrique de la Peña, *With Santa Anna in Texas*, was published by Texas A&M Press in 1975. The 1997 edition includes a discussion of the controversy over the manuscript's authenticity in the valuable new introduction by James E. Crisp of North Carolina State University, a leading proponent of the execution theory. See also James E. Crisp, "The Little Book That Wasn't There: The Myth and Mystery of the de la Peña Diary," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 98 (October 1994). Dan Kilgore also argues that Crockett was executed in *How Did Davy Die?* (Texas A&M Press, 1978) and "Take That, John Wayne," *Texas Monthly*, August 1978. Bill Groneman assembles the arguments against the execution thesis in *Defense of a Legend* (Wordware Publishing, 1994). Readers interested in a detailed debate between authorities on both sides, including Crisp, Groneman and Thomas Ricks Lindley, can consult back issues of *The Alamo Journal*, edited by William R. Chemerka, 7 Heritage Drive, East Hanover, N.J. 07936.